DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 048 TM 035 286

AUTHOR	Suranna, Keith J.
TITLE	What's Wrong with This Picture? Reflections on the Conundrum of Standardized Testing.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Achievement Tests; *Elementary Secondary Education; Political Influences; *Standardized Tests; *Student Evaluation; *Test Use; *Testing Problems

ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the use of state-mandated achievement tests to evaluate what children have learned, drawing on the experiences of an elementary school teacher and the Connecticut Mastery Test. In this time of increased interest in testing, it is necessary to guard against rigidity of thought regarding intelligence, teaching and learning, and child development. It is essential to remain open to the mysteries of the individual learner and the organic nature of the classroom. Standardized tests, no matter how politically motivated or well developed, will always fail to assess this. (SLD)

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Reflections on the Conundrum of Standardized Testing

Keith J. Suranna

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What's Wrong with This Picture?
Reflections on the Conundrum of Standardized Testing

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The Connecticut elementary school in which I served during my first year as a third grade teacher was federally recognized as a Blue Ribbon public school for its innovative and creative approach. After working in schools in which I did not agree with many teaching practices and philosophies, I was happy that my new school's curriculum was one that appeared to be learner-centered and developmentally appropriate. Each student was viewed as an individual with unique strengths and talents that would be valued and nurtured in our "community of learners." Our administrators consistently expressed that it was up to us teachers to nurture lifetime learners, imbued with strong critical thinking skills and not simply ones that could regurgitate a string of unrelated facts. This all rang true to my idealistic young ears. However, when it came time to administer the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), attitudes suddenly began to shift.

Like standardized achievement tests mandated by many other states, the CMT is a battery of exams given each year to all fourth, sixth, and eighth grade students throughout the state. With their number two pencils, students answer questions on reading passages, compute a variety of math problems, and write to a story prompt within an allotted amount of time. Although my third graders were not required to take the "official" CMT, I was responsible for administering to them the pre-CMT, an exam thought to ready third

graders for the next year, when their test results would be deemed "official." It was clear, however, that the pressure was still on us third grade teachers. My colleagues and I were often reminded by our principal, "It's really the third grade teachers' work that impacts how the fourth graders do on the CMT."

What's Wrong with This Picture?

When the pre-CMT scores arrived at the school in December of my first year, I discovered that the majority of my students scored below the district's goal. In order for them to perform better on the CMT in fourth grade, it was decided that these students would be removed from my classroom to gain remediation. A letter went home to these students' parents informing them that their children would be serviced with a "more individualized" type of instruction. These children were conveniently labeled as remedial and removed from my classroom for approximately three hours per week. During these times, from January through June, merely seven out of twenty-two of my students remained in the classroom. Since I could not introduce anything new with such a small number of students in the room, I was forced to suspend the flow of my teaching. As any elementary teacher knows, when considering special education, ESL, and other services, as well as instrumental music lessons and specials, the time that one has with the entire class is sometimes rare and extremely valuable.

I later discovered that two paraprofessionals were running the remedial class that consisted of approximately thirty third graders. Of course, I could not help wondering what kind of "individualized" instruction was occurring in this situation. This unfortunate incident illustrates that even a well-balanced, award-winning elementary

school can discount its own solid curriculum and approach by succumbing to the pressures of one state-mandated achievement test.

Hammering on Cold Iron

Horace Mann once said, "A teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn is hammering on cold iron." Yet, this is precisely what we are asking teachers to do by having them focus so much of their attention on state-mandated achievement tests. In looking at this type of test as the primary assessment tool, and making vital educative decisions about a child, we discount many important aspects of that individual. As a great many schools claim, the curriculum should help foster each child's unique gifts. However, when we put these unique, individual gifts aside to focus simply on having the student score high on one test, we do the individual an injustice.

The Bush Administration's *No Child Left Behind* calls for even more testing than ever. This will most certainly assure that the destructive by-products of standardized testing will be with us for the foreseeable future. The results of the tests will continue to be abused by being published in newspapers. School districts will then continue to be compared and ranked. We will thus continue to make the erroneous inference that since districts have scored high on the tests, learning must be taking place. Or even worse, we will assume that our children are not intelligent because they scored low. Teachers' professional competency will continue to be judged solely by students' results on just one test. Urban educators will continue to struggle with variables of which they have little control when it comes to how their students score. And even though drug use, teen

pregnancy, crime, truancy, housing problems, and familial issues all play major roles in how some students perform, these factors will continue to be ignored when we simply look at numbers. Finally, students who are predicted to score low on the test will continue to be removed from their classrooms during testing time, to insure that their scores will not be factored in with the other students'. And so, the conundrum will continue.

Conclusion

Is the use of a state-mandated standardized achievement test that is administered once a year truly the best way to holistically evaluate what a child has learned? Must we constantly be reminded that there exists many other and better ways to assess students' achievement? In these test-crazed times we must consistently guard against rigidity of thought regarding intelligence, teaching and learning, and child development. We must instead remain open to the mysteries of the individual learner and to the organic nature of the classroom. And standardized tests, no mater how politically motivated or well developed, will always fail to assess this.

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